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SUBJECT: ASHGABAT'S NEWEST SCHOOL: A HIGH-TECH EXTRAVAGANZA FOR
COPS' KIDS

REF: ASHGABAT 00923

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Ashgabat's newest school, named in honor of President Saparmurat Niyazov's grandfather, is a lavish facility for 800 students that includes all the modern amenities and a large computer lab full of Dell computers, but with no internet connection. Nearby stands a luxurious kindergarten for 160. Funded by the Office of the Prosecutor General and built for the children of law enforcement personnel, the luxury of the building is a testament to the confidence -- and funds -- of its sponsoring ministry. However, the testing process for entrance, the classes offered and the "real" opening date of the facility remain mysteries. Part of an ongoing vanity construction campaign to transform Ashgabat into a "white city," the school bears the typical marks of these projects: it is excessively expensive, visually impressive and likely destined to be underused by just a few elite children. End Summary

A New (Elite) Type of School

2. (U) On September 1, the first of 20 special secondary schools and 20 kindergartens that will be built in Ashgabat under a February 2006 presidential directive (reftel) was festively opened by President Niyazov. These schools, which are being built by each of Turkmenistan's ministries, are destined for the children of ministry employees. The school opened on September 1 was built by the Office of the Prosecutor General for approximately 800 children of law enforcement officials. The facility sits at the base of the Kopetdag Mountains near the president's residence, in an area where neighborhoods deemed to be eyesores have been bulldozed.

A Festive Opening

3. (U) President Niyazov drove himself to the opening (his usual practice), where a crowd of several hundred government representatives, students of higher education institutions and a group of children in miniature military uniforms greeted him with chants of praise for the Great Leader. Scores of military and law enforcement personnel in uniform stood in formation along the road leading to the building. Among the ministers meeting the president were Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov, Ashgabat Mayor and Minister of Construction Ozmyrat Esenov, Minister of Oil and Gas Gurbanmyrat Atayev, Minister of Energy Yusup Davudov and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Minister of Health Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. Minister of Education Shemshat Annagylyjova stood in the wings away from the president; although a school, the facility will be administered by its sponsoring institution, the

Office of the Prosecutor General.

An Academic Potemkin Village

14. (U) The diplomatic corps waited patiently in the morning sun for a tour of the new building - which began in the marbled foyer dominated by a large bust of the president, which is flanked by busts of four ancient heroes of Turkmenistan. A Ruhnama room greets visitors at the entrance; an additional Ruhnama classroom full of smiling children was the first classroom stop on the tour, which also included a music room, swimming pool (about 25 meters with four lanes), gymnasium with basketball court where gymnasts and young boxers were training, and an auditorium with about 300 seats. Although Russian language, chemistry and geography classrooms, and computer and photo laboratories were locked, guests had a glimpse into these rooms via a promotional video screened in the auditorium. There, the president sat in a throne-style chair in the center of the room and occasionally made statements in Turkmen to all assembled. The auditorium was already half-full of teenaged exhibition students dressed in the mandatory velvet dress and skullcap with braids for girls, and short sleeved dress shirt and tie and skullcap for boys. However, host country representatives did not clearly answer Emboff's questions about the nature of the school's curriculum and instruction, or how students would be selected.

Comment

15. (SBU) This institution, whose construction was begun under the ill-fated former Prosecutor-General (who since has been convicted of corruption and is reported to have died in prison) appears to be a concession to one ministry, to school an elite population living in an elite area of the city. It will likely have little, if any, positive impact on the worsening quality of education given most children here. As such, it continues a trend of wasteful

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construction projects in the capital whose primary purpose is to glorify the president and give substance to the official mantra that Turkmenistan is living in its Golden Age. End Comment

BRUSH